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LINCOLN, JEFFERSON DAVIS AND FRANCIS PRESTON BLAIR

By Gist Blair

It is hard for us to understand how anyone in December, 1864, or January, 1865, could consider a compromise possible between the warring North and South. Grant was pounding his way into Richmond and every thinking man considered the South defeated and any compromise at that time would be a suggestion from the heart alone. It was indeed the great Lincoln who could foresee a united country clearer than his contemporaries and how a compromise might bring together the warring family of Americans so as to unite them under the flag once more, who at this time issued his Amnesty Proclamation. It was, no doubt, with this in mind that he tacitly permitted my grandfather, Francis Preston Blair, to undertake his interesting journey to Richmond to attempt a settlement and persuade the South to accept what he offered.

My grandfather was then approaching his 75th year and affectionately called by the President "Father Blair." He is credited with having conceived the plan of going to Richmond to see President Jefferson Davis to try to convince him of the futility of further efforts, and of the disinterestedness that dominated Lincoln, and of the advisability of surrender before the South was vanquished and helpless before exasperated conquerors. The visit explains the Amnesty Proclamation as one of forgiveness and reconciliation.

History gives the result of the visit and how President Lincoln went to Fortress Monroe and conferred with representatives of the Confederacy in his vain effort at persuading Jefferson Davis to admit defeat and receive the small dole which could have been given the South by a generous nation for a cessation of war. And yet Davis and his counsellors would not bend to the inevitable and declined the opportunity offered them.

The pretext for "Father Blair's" visit to Richmond was his wish to find certain valuable papers taken from his house at Silver Spring, Maryland, by the Confederates under General Early in his raid through Maryland. General Early arrived at the confines of the City of Washington and with his staff occupied the home of Francis Preston Blair at Silver Spring on an evening of July, 1864, burning the home of his son, Montgomery Blair, the Postmaster General of the United States, which was in close

proximity. Rumor states that a good old barrel of Kentucky whiskey had most to do with preventing these tired and worn-out Confederates from entering and capturing the City of Washington that famous evening when Washington's forts were not fully manned by soldiers of the Union.

To secure passports to Richmond, Mr. Blair alleged these officers secured certain papers during their occupation of the house and carried them away and he wished to search for them in Richmond.

And the following letter and passport were given him for this purpose by Hon. James A. Seddon, Secretary of War for the Confederacy.

"Letter:

"War Dept., Decr. 31st, '64.

"F. P. Blair, Esq.,

of Washington, U. States.

"Sir:—The letter from yourself to the President of the Confederate States, requesting the Privilege of visiting Richmond, with a view to regain some title deeds or papers of Importance, supposed to have been taken from your house by some persons during its occupation by the Confederate forces in the late invasion into Maryland, has been referred by him for consideration by me. The papers referred to were not taken by any authority of the department, or the officers of its armies, and no knowledge in respect to them is possessed by it. It is not, however, the wish of the department, that any countenance or sufferance should even appear to be given by it to aid of plundering on the private property of non-combatants, and hence there is the disposition to facilitate in all proper modes the discovery and restitution of private property wrongfully taken.

"The privilege you ask of visiting Richmond is therefore granted by the enclosed Passport, but since you hold the relation of a public enemy, you can enjoy the privilege only on the terms of a *Strict* parole of Honor to confine your intercourse and action while in the Confederate States to the purpose indicated in your communication to the President, and either, while there or on your return to the United States, to do or reveal nothing to the detriment of the Confederate States.

"Respectfully yours,

"James A. Sedden,

Secy. of War."

"Passport:

"War Dept., Dec. 31st, 1864.

"F. P. Blair, Esq., of the District of Columbia, U. States, having applied for permission to visit Richmond in the Confederate States with a view to regain certain private papers supposed to have been wrongfully taken by some persons during the occupancy of his House by the Confederate Army is hereby authorized to pass our lines under flag of Truce and to visit Richmond, on strict parole of Honor, however, to restrict his intercourse and action during his visit to the purposes indicated in his letter of application, and neither while there (in the Confederate States) nor on his return to

the United States to reveal anything detrimental to the Confederate States.

"James A. Sedden,
Secy. of War."

A great deal of the scanty memorandum still in existence concerning this strange visit of an old man to see his former friend, the President of the Confederacy, who had lived and dined and passed many years of friendly intercourse near him in Washington before the war, refers to a prospective war to drive the French from Mexico. The personal details are not very fully given and the politics are no longer important. The visit was undertaken because his warm heart, overflowing with kindness, caused him to believe he could persuade Jefferson Davis to yield before it was too late and gain something for his dear Southern country. When Mr. Blair offered this prospective incursion or war upon and into Mexico for Mr. Davis to think over, the French under Louis Napoleon had made a monarchy of Mexico. The Republican Party approved of the Monroe Doctrine and his plan was, therefore, to enable the North and South to fraternize and unite in a project which would make them forget their little difficulties. "Father Blair" proposed a combined army from both sections should be used to enforce the Monroe Doctrine by casting out the French from Mexico. This plan contemplated the enlargement of the country towards the South so he hoped it would attract that section. Its failure leaves today war and suffering where prosperty and happiness might now be found.

We know how the French retired from Mexico without waiting for us to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. But to understand the details of this interview here, it is necessary to explain the purpose of the plan proposed.

While in Richmond, Francis Preston Blair, obtained the ear of Mr. Davis and on his return wrote of his interview and trip in part as follows:

(Mr. Blair): "After urging upon him (Jefferson Davis) the plans of a compromise, and saying that I had become an old man and what I was about to submit to him (Davis) might be dreams of an old man, but that I depended upon his practical good sense to assure him whether they were dreams that could be realized or not. That I had no doubt that he would deal with me with the utmost frankness and give me credit, for the like candor. That he knew that every drop of my blood and of all my children flowed from a Southern source. That I loved my whole country, but could not help feeling the force of the affections which my native instincts, confirmed by habit, attached me to the South.

"He replied that he gave me full confidence, knew that I was an earnest man and believed I was an honest one, and said he reciprocated the attachment which I had expressed for him and his family.

"I then read the paper to him, giving the plan of compromise, skipping some portions of it which

I thought bore rather hard on the South, saying as I turned the leaf, I would pass this over, it smacks too much of the editorial." (Mr. Blair had been Editor of 'The Globe,' a newspaper published in Washington to defend General Jackson and his policies. He had left Kentucky to settle there and take charge of this paper at the suggestion of General Jackson when President of the United States.) He laughed at this. I went through the paper. I then said to him, 'There is the plan, Mr. Davis, do you think it possible to be solved?' After consideration, he said, 'I think so.' I then said, 'You see that I make the great point of this matter that the war is no longer made for slavery, but monarchy. You know, that if the war is kept up and the Union kept divided, armies must be kept afoot on both sides, and this state of things has never continued long without resulting in monarchy on one side or the other, and on both generally.' He assented to this and with great emphasis remarked that he was like Lucius Junius Brutus and uttered the sentiment ascribed him in Shakespeare without exactly quoting it.

'There was a Brutus once who would have brooked the eternal devil to keep his state in Rome as easily as a king.'

"Then he said that he was thoroughly for popular government. That this feeling had been born and bred in him. Touching the project, he said, of bringing the sections together again, the great difficulty was the excessive vindictiveness produced by outrages perpetrated in the invaded states during the war. He said reconcilement must depend, he thought, upon time and events which he hoped would restore better feelings, but that he was certain that no circumstances would have a greater effect than to see the arms of our countrymen from the North and the South united in a war upon a foreign power assailing the principles of government, common to both sections, and threatening their destruction. And he said he was convinced that all the powers of Europe felt to their interest that our people in this quarrel should exhaust all their energies in destroying each other, and thus make them a prey to the potentates of Europe who felt that the destruction of our government was necessary to the maintenance of the monarchical principles on which their own were founded.

"I told him that I was encouraged by finding him holding these views and believed that our country, if impressed with them, as I thought it might be immensely, would soon renew its happy union. He said I ought to know, Oh, with what reluctance he had drawn out of the Union, that he labored to the last moment to avoid it, that he had followed the Old Flag longer and with more devotion than anything else on earth, that at Bull Run when he saw the flag he supposed it was his own hanging on the staff. They were more alike then than now, and when the flag of the United States unfurled itself in the breeze he saw it with a sigh, but he had to choose between it and his own, and he had looked to it as that of an enemy. He felt now it was laid up, but the circumstances to which we had ad-

verted might restore it and reconcilement easier.

"In relation to the vindictiveness produced by the war, I said I thought he was mistaken in supposing it would be attended with great difficulty in producing reconcilement between the states and people. I told him I had spent four hours on the picket line and perceived that kind feeling existed instead of estrangement between the men on both sides who stood around to shoot each other. There was nothing to prevent the immediate indulgence of hostile feelings if they felt them. But they evidently manifestd a friendly feeling. A Boston captain, Deacon, who carried me through the lines to deliver me over to Captain Davis, of South Carolina, drew his bottle from his bag and proposed to drink his health. They drank together with mutual goodwill and gave each other their hands. This spirit of magnanimity exists in the soldiery on both sides. It is only the politicians and those who profit or hope to profit by the disasters of the war who indulge in acrimony. Mr. Davis said that what I remarked was very just in the main.

"He admitted that it was for the most part the people at home who brooded over the disasters of the war who indulged in bitterness.

"Touching the matter of arrangement for reconcilement proposed by me, he remarked that all depended upon well-founded confidence, and looking at me with very significant expression he said, 'What, Mr. Blair, do you think of it?' * * * *

"But I said this matter if entered upon at all, must be with Mr. Lincoln himself. The transaction is a military transaction and depends entirely upon the Commander-in-Chief of our armies. If he goes into it he will certainly consider it as the affair of the military head of the government. Now, I know that Mr. Lincoln is capable of great personal sacrifices, of sacrificing the strongest feelings of his heart, of sacrificing a friend when he thinks it necessary for the good of the country, and you may rely upon it if he pledges his faith to any man he will maintain his word inviolably. Mr. Davis said he was glad to hear me say so. He did not know Mr. Lincoln, but he was sure I did, and therefore my declaration gave him the highest satisfaction. * * * *

"In reply to some remarks that I made as to the fame he would acquire in relieving the country from all its distress, restoring its harmony, and extending its dominion to the Isthmus, he said what his name might be in history he cared not. If he could restore the prosperity and happiness of his country—that was the end and aim of his being. For himself death would end his cares and that was very easy to be accomplished.

"The next day after my first interview, he sent me a note saying he thought I might desire to have something in writing in regard to his conclusion, and therefore he made a brief statement which I brought away."

Perhaps no greater opportunity can be given to see the true Lincoln that greatest of all Kentuckians, than this little incident affords. If

opportunity is not accepted when offered it comes not a second time. Bearing the wand of peace to save the country, Mr. Blair's attempt failed, as we all know. An interview, however, was arranged as the result of this visit to Richmond, and President Lincoln met the Southern commissioners, but President Davis remained stubborn and unyielding. Perhaps later he remembered the warm heart which prompted this effort to alleviate and end the suffering of war and unite the country. In the trials and tribulations which overwhelmed him and Mrs. Davis after the surrender of General Lee at Appomatox, she appealed for help to the same "Father Blair" while President Davis was seeking to escape. She still believed in the heart of the aged man who had crossed through two great fighting armies to Richmond during cold winter months, seeking without reward to unite the suffering country. Until the death of President Davis and his wife and Francis Preston Blair their friendship continued to exist notwithstanding this failure to save the South at the last moment.